Please cite the Published Version

CHARA LEWIS
Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University

KRISTIN MOJSIEWICZ
Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh

ANNEKE PETTICAN
The University of Huddersfield

Brass Art – Freud's figure-ground in motion: Macabre, rare, banal, eerie and sentimental

Abstract

Brass Art's intervention into Freud's house attempted to grant its solid objects, furniture and rooms a light, apparitional quality. Their performances at Maresfield Gardens were recorded with three Kinect sensors, the undifferentiated laser's touch rendering all objects – alive, dead, static, breathing – with the same white, shining, pixellated brilliance. Objects and places that formed the props and settings for performances assume an intense luminosity, appearing to hover and tilt in a horizonless figure-ground. The interplay of focus, proximity and perception returns to consideration of the atemporal image. As artist Susan Hiller in her own

observations of the Freud Museum states, 'Close consideration of its beautiful, utilitarian, tedious, scholarly, macabre, rare, banal, eerie, and sentimental objects produces a picture in which figure-ground relationships seem to constantly shift'. This article introduces the new, multi-screen sonic work On the Thread of One Desire *in development by Brass Art. It examines the way in which their recorded performances draw attention to the unconscious, the atemporal and the uncanny, and how the work foregrounds the loop, the arc and the full 360° revolution, with the intention of amplifying and revealing some of the unfolding narratives embedded in Freud's London home.*

Prologue

We are all haunted houses.

(Hilda Doolittle in Royle 2003: 1)

The two video works that we have produced at The Freud Museum – *Freud's House: The Double* and *Freud's House: The Double Mirror* – are the second iteration of our larger project Shadow Worlds | Writers' Rooms (2011–present). This ambitious work comprises three chapters: 'Chapter 1 – The Brontë parsonage, Haworth'; 'Chapter 2 – The Freud Museum, London'; and 'Chapter 3 – Monk's House, Rodmell', the former home of Virginia Woolf. In these moving image works we have used a Kinect scanner to capture our movements through the interior domestic space of the Brontë Parsonage and the ruins of Wycoller Hall (near Haworth) during a series of nocturnal visits in 2011–13 and Freud's London home (now Museum) in 2013. Working with programmer Spencer Roberts we realized the potential to exploit the Kinect sensor's flaws in order to produce our own shadow plays – formed when an object obstructs the laser, the resulting occlusion appears as a black shadow but is in fact a lack of data, something that the eye cannot perceive. These shadows, cast by the artists' figures and 'seen' by the lasers, are entirely unseen by the eye during the process of play. The resultant video footage from the Kinect sensor reveals the scene of the artists in situ, whilst simultaneously recording an unseen shadow realm.

An approach to the shadow realm

In the making of an artwork there often exists a kind of *aporia* – a set of seemingly irresolvable internal contradictions: the universal versus the particular; the singular versus the multiple; the visible versus the invisible. These are recurring concerns and motifs in our practice and the most significant artworks attest to this internal complexity – the *aporia* exists in making it manifest in an artwork. Our collaborative thought positions are rarely fixed viewpoints, but rather offer a perspective in which opposing ideas coalesce or rub, advancing a set of scenarios with the potential for excavation and extraction. Susannah Thompson, reviewing an exposition of the collected Brontë video works,
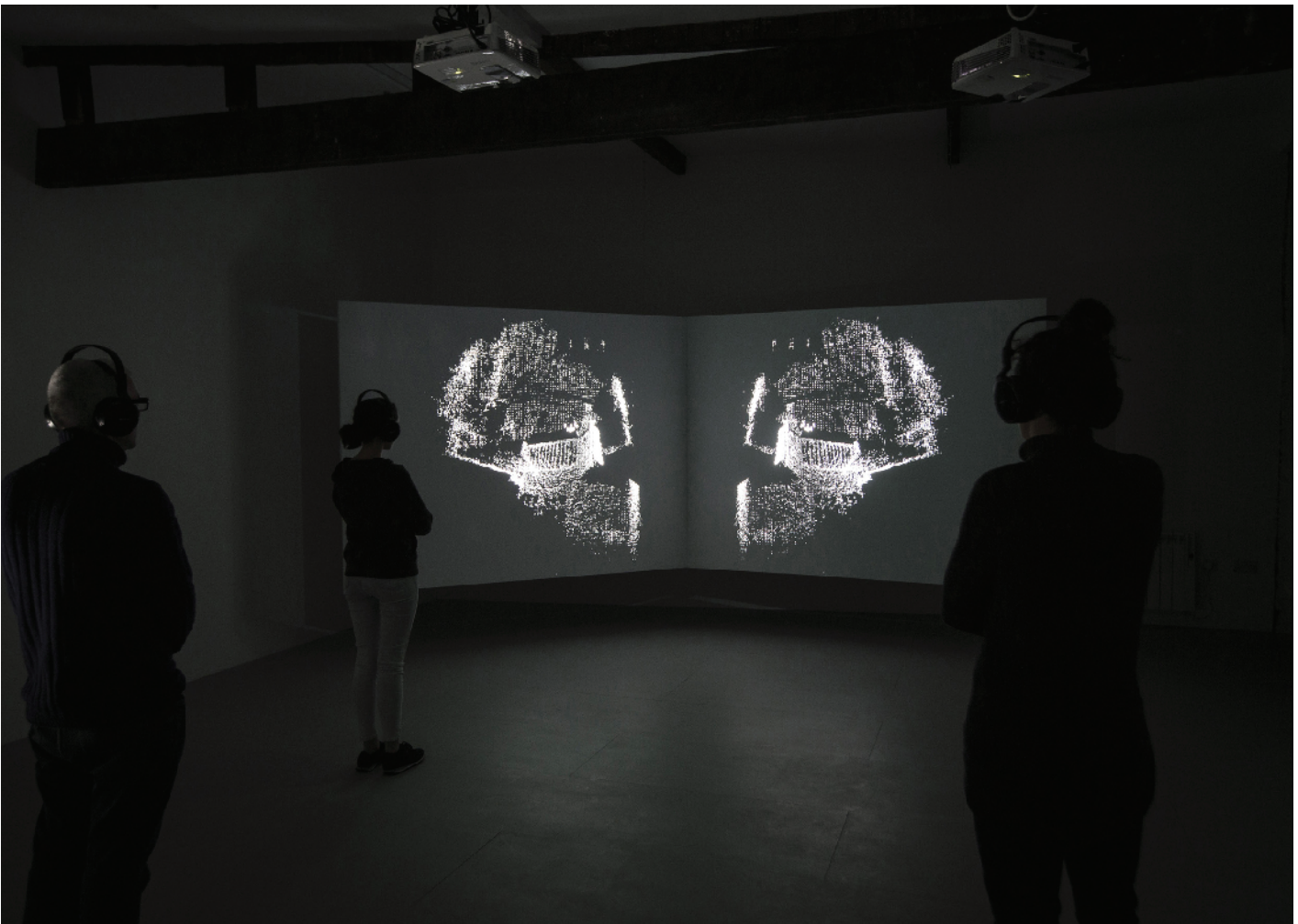
Figure 1: Freud's House: The Double Mirror, *installation view, The International3 Gallery, Manchester 18 September–30 October 2015.*

with soundscape, attested that, 'Both image and sound combine to unsettle and distort any attempt at single-point perspective or 'fixing' on the part of the audience' (Thompson 2014: 43).

Scene 1: A central figure is transformed by a faux-shamanic headdress and wings, caught in a constant rotational movement. The dervish is imbued with unbounded energy, endlessly looping and beating outstretched wings. The dimensions of the space are domestic but not specific, the scene is dominated by the looming shadow as the dervish dances with her shadow 'cast' into the space – a silhouetted double, eternally spinning.

We have been working with aspects of Freud's writings on the uncanny in our collaborative practice for many years. Initially drawn to ideas about the double and the shadow as both uncanny agents and harbingers of death, we have recently focused on exploring the architectural uncanny and more nuanced definitions of the homely/unhomely. The opportunity to momentarily occupy and play out scenarios in Freud's former home and consulting room presented us with a formidable task. To critically engage with his space, his objects and his writings had to be counterbalanced during our archival sojourn with retaining a sense of playful appropriation. With this in mind we approached the rooms as a series of frames within which scenarios might play out:

> The psychoanalytic set of the desk, chair and couch of Freud's study is the core of the house for many visitors and researchers. We have written about this as being *the house* (desk, etc) *within the house* (study) *within the house* (museum) *within the house* (building). This four-fold recursive framing is another example of *mise en abyme* – a set of nesting dolls – haunted by an elsewhere, the ghost of Vienna.

The living haunt the dead

At the centre is Freud's desk, with its attendant artefacts smuggled out of Vienna, and his anthropomorphic chair (specially designed for reading not writing). With one sweep of his arm or swivel of the chair, Freud could reach out to the touchstones of his thinking process – the collected antiquities and artefacts lining his desk and cabinets –'an audience of bronze, wood and marble' (Wood 2006: 6). Their proximity to, and distance from, him and each other has been the focus for much speculation and writing. Some of these talismanic figures accompanied him on holiday, suggesting that they had a pivotal part to play in his creative process. Seeing them close-to, and en masse, they collapse the time frames of Ancient Egypt, China, Assyria, Greece and Rome. Their spatial relations to each other serve to make time 'thick' and tangible. From our perspective, the proximity to the objects – being allowed to touch masks, objects, books, furniture – was a new experience, and a way of testing the Kinect further – what could it effectively excavate and see, and what would remain subterranean and unseen by the laser?

To set the scene of our invisible intervention at Maresfield Gardens:

A domestic space brought to life by its new, temporary occupants. A scanner-eye sees through walls and doors; the certainty of interior and exterior dissolves, leaving nothing less than the dissolution of the architecture of the house. As sound echoes upstairs and through closed doors, the potential to pass through solid surfaces is for us – as sojourners – one of the most compelling aspects of this intervention.

These signs of spatial dissolution are uncanny in their aspect – a correlation of environmental disorientation, traces and markers of intimate lives and their lived-spaces. The apparently involuntary repetition of our performances, doublings and mirroring become the site of claustrophobia – where the homely becomes the unhomely and the living haunt the dead.

For Anthony Vidler the domestic is a particularly apposite site for the re-emergence of the uncanny, the apparent stability and safety undermined by an ever-present fear of the threat of invasion, and while the nonspecific attributes of the uncanny make it a rich vein for exploration, it is recognized that this broad spectrum of meaning may be seen as subversive in distinct ways: first, that it is 'at times indistinguishable from the sublime' ([1992] 1996: 21), and therefore slippery and disruptive to theorizing attempts. Second, in relation to the etymology of the uncanny – *heimlich* and *unheimlich* – the prefix un- is not just a sign of the negation of the term. Anneleen Masschelein states that in psychoanalytic discourse the uncanny is

> […] marked by the unconscious that does not know negation or contradiction; even when something is negated, it still remains present in the unconscious. According to this reasoning, the contradiction resulting from negation is not exclusive or binary: denying something at the same time conjures it up. Hence, it is perfectly possible that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.
>
> (2011: 8)

This interchangeability of the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is perhaps the most uncanny aspect of all – and proposes a simultaneous and opposite movement through the concept between the binary positions.

Third, and perhaps most interestingly for us as artists, to expand upon this lexical ambivalence, the uncanny as a negative concept allows for a revision and refusal of binary positioning – instead of 'either/or' it is an 'and/and' – described by Masschelein as a '*mise en abyme* for the logic of Freudianism' (2011: 8).

In our practice, to follow this model – 'and/and' – can be a method of subverting the cannon of received narratives and linear histories. It is a way of opening back up the text, the author and their works to a scrutiny that can be playful and irreverent and yet still shed new light on theories and their temporal resonances and relevance. This duality – of 'and/and' – also presents us with the 'possibility to infect and undermine old ways of thinking' (Masschelein 2011: 8).
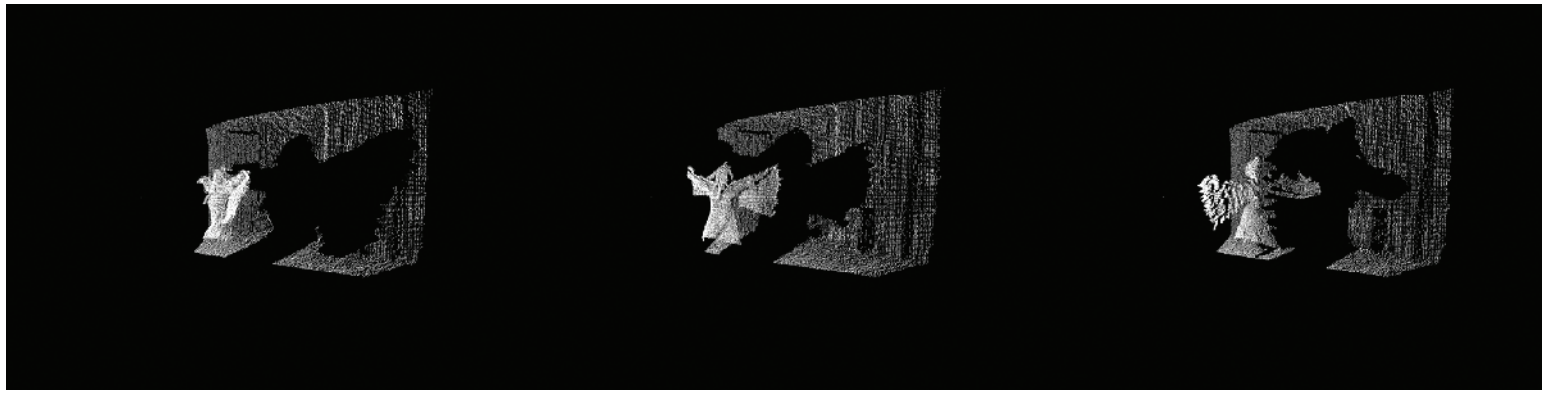
Figure 2: On the Thread of One Desire, *video stills, 2016. Copyright: Brass Art.*
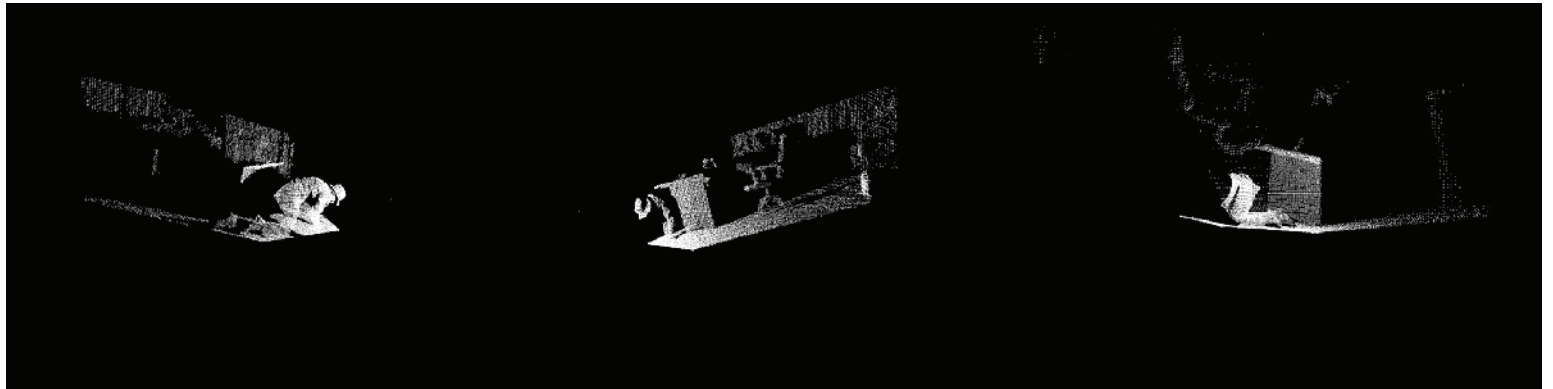

Figure 3: On the Thread of One Desire, *video stills, 2016. Copyright: Brass Art.*

The repetitions, loops and the circularity of ideas and fictions widely recognized as uncanny are mirrored in the genealogy of the concept traced in Freud's writing, and that of his contemporaries and predecessors. Masschelein also follows the transmission of it through literary, aesthetic and theoretical means, to propose that, throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, the uncanny became a model for other types of knowledge, 'operating on the margin of a more general "Theory" governed by ambivalence, uncertainty, repetition, haunting and fiction' (2011: 112).

Scene 2: The side edge of a desk casts a shadow looming onto a surprisingly close rear wall. Behind the desk Freud's famous chair is seen. The acute perspective of the scene appears severed in the foreground as the view slowly turns anticlockwise. A figure enters, crawling towards and behind the desk. The viewpoint twists and seemingly the character is now crawling on the near side of the desk – in front and away from us. Slowly, feeling their way forward until another surprising twist and, once again, they are crawling behind the desk disappearing behind the strange chair. As the figure moves off-screen, the perspective tilts and the view shifts until it seems that we are viewing the scene from a subterranean level – the chair now above us on a different plane. The figure returns as the scanner rotates behind the chair.

Material specificity: Transition or transience

In the essay 'Ghostly medium', Rebecca Comay and Michael Newman posit, 'What if we take the sense of medium literally – not simply as the material specificity of an artform but as a modality of transportation or passage; a mechanism of transition or transience?' (2012: 35).

This proposal by Comay and Newman is germane to the moving image footage conjured by the Kinect Sensor and reappraises the laser's light touch, its ability to visibly and invisibly mark thresholds and witness movements in space (through Spencer Roberts' programming). To shine a cone of unseen lasers into a space and reveal the formerly invisible characteristics, along with any attendant gestural movements, offers a new perspective in which to consider the virtual, psychic and the real in space. The processed Kinect data becomes a medium that in itself effects a material transition.

Joanne Morra acknowledged this momentary visibility in relation to *Freud's House: The Double*, and *Freud's House: The Double Mirror*:

> The technical aspects of the scanner, its ability to document the seen and unseen, turn into a series of metaphors for understanding presence and absence, thoughts and memories, the conscious and unconscious, figures and their ghosts. In this way, the artists propose that they are able to engage with the sense of [a] possible reanimation of objects or sites, a revisitation of a power that may seem ostensibly 'dead'. The reanimation of site or object evokes a sense of the mnemonic and brings to the fore aspects of memory, knowledge, translation and inscription.

What these practices invoke is the way in which Shadow Worlds | Writers' Rooms makes manifest the rich complexity of Freud's conception of space as the projection of the psychic apparatus.

(Morra 2015: 2)

This process of capture enables us to record an invisible layer of point cloud data that relates accurately to the physical world(s) that we occupy, and reveals aspects of movement and transition in the space that are usually unseen. Thus, it could be argued that the laser beams create a sort of sensorial architectural relief of the inhabited space, and our performances offer an atemporal interplay of focus, proximity and perception. As artist Susan Hiller in her own observations of working with the Freud Museum states, 'Close consideration of its beautiful, utilitarian, tedious, scholarly, macabre, rare, banal, eerie, and sentimental objects produces a picture in which figure-ground relationships seem to constantly shift' (Hiller 2000: Afterword).

Coleman and Comay's question seems particularly apt in relation to our sojourn in Freud's former London home. As stated, the idea of measuring ourselves in and against this space, both as a literal mapping and as a metaphoric one, was integral to our approach. In addition, the possibility of mimicking one another – to dis-assemble and de-aggregate our individual selves into a more radical and complex set of characters and personae (which could possibly represent man, woman, apparition) – was a departure from previous performances but a clear extension of how we have used metamorphic shadows in drawings and sculptural installations.

The potential for visual misrecognition – mistaking one of us for another – permeates many of our artworks. Introducing props and disguise has become a way of thinking through the space in the time between the initial research visit and the actual capture process (with programmer and composer, and attendant conservators or curators). This process became particularly resonant at the Freud Museum, partly because in our preparations we had the instinctive thought to measure ourselves collectively against the architecture of the space: to walk in step; to grasp objects with the same force; to mask our identities in a collective other; and to embody Vidler's proposition that 'space […] has been increasingly defined as a product of subjective projection and introjection as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies' (2002: 1).

The possible and implied instability of space could also lead us to consider that the cloud point data produced by laser are themselves a mesh of unreliable memory. Not everything is picked up by the laser – small details or things outwith the sensor's range remain unseen and invisible – a shift in the position of the Kinect would render the scene differently. It is tempting then to imagine that, within the available depth of field, occluded objects or more distant details avoid capture and remain unremembered, repressed and unconscious in the subsequent rendering of the data, in a literal refusal to be brought to light. Conversely, viewers of *Freud's House: The Double*, or *Freud's House: The Double Mirror*, want to believe that the central character is in fact a psychic projection of Freud and his memories made manifest.

Scene 3: A pair of disembodied legs are viewed from a steep perspective in a small, domestic space achieving an impossible, continuous rhythm – a short syncopation of never-ending leg kicks. The camera view is static, with deep shadows cast by the moving figure and attendant chair. The anthropomorphic form of Freud's study chair, unmistakable despite its 'noisy' pixelated form, makes a static counterpart to the unceasing action. The proximity of the action to Freud's desk and chair seems at once a playful and irreverent pairing, a trespass beyond the usual museum boundaries to capture the scene.

On the Thread of One Desire

Our first work produced from Maresfield Gardens, *Freuds' House: The Double*, revolved around the domestic staircase of his home. The new work, titled *On the Thread of One Desire*, directly addresses the temporal rather than the cinematic, and presents an expanded collection of rooms, multiplying the real, spatial parameters of the house. The title refers to the atemporal nature of this process of reverie, as described by Freud, in relation to the daydream – which brings past and present, conscious and unconscious sources of identity and behaviour together – 'past present and future are strung together, as it were on the thread of the wish that runs through them' (Freud [1906–1908] 2001: 148).

Each room is afforded its own monitor and audio track that focuses on specific loops and oscillations. The videos revolve and repeat as the action in one screen appears to set off another. Different tableaux can be seen in motion or at rest; spaces may be mirrored, bisected and returned to. These boundaries appear fluid and permeable, the architecture unfixed. The resulting work contains interventions and physical exertions that offer different tempos and rhythmic patterns. We are glitched, recycled, dreamlike, distorted, durational and atemporal. We act, watch, move and react in response to the space. Characters appear and disappear. The resulting loops are fragmentary and the sounds, captured while both perform-ing in the setting and responding to texts and sonic textures in the studio with Monty Adkins, are both evocative and strange. In the first Freud's House piece the sonic elements were re-introduced to the captured moving image in an altered state: deliberately out of place and out of time. Audio coaxed from the site was stretched, synthesized, looped and mismatched; voices map onto footsteps, a door closing is matched with a falling skirt. In the new work, the sound – equally out of place and time – is constructed as separate elements of a symphony accompanying the spatial installation of individual, looped actions.

Scene 4: The vision is skewed with the horizon at an oblique angle. Occurring to the right of centre, an inverted figure maintains a spider-like pose of impossible duration. It appears to be human, headless and ambiguous in gender. This hysteric arch is an awkward, continuous presence, its slight movement mimicking a digital glitch as it remains trapped in juddering stasis.

The effect of the figure caught in a never-ending loop or glitch causes the moment of time surrounding the action to be trapped in the process of coming about – between what is 'no longer' and what is 'not yet'. Yve Lomax articulates this thought position that, rather than a 'cessation of time' in the interval she sees,

Figure 4: On the Thread of One Desire, *video stills, 2016. Copyright: Brass Art.*
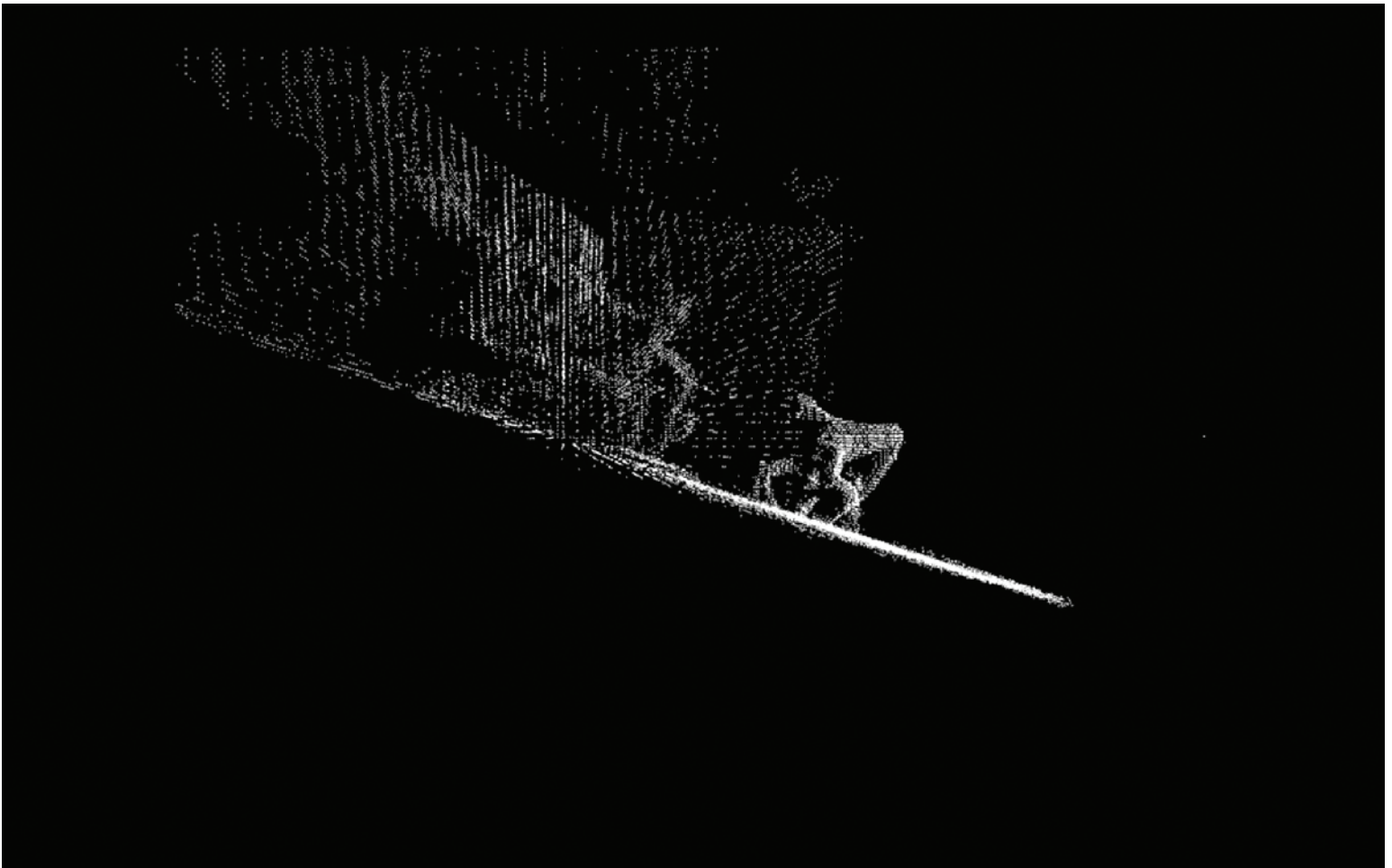
Figure 5: On the Thread of One Desire, *video stills, 2016. Copyright: Brass Art.*

the opening up of an immeasurable time […] I am not seeing the time of Chronos but I am seeing the time of Aion, and this time is, at least for Deleuze, the time that opens in events – always and at the same time something that has just happened and something about to happen; never something that is happening.

(2006: 59)

The empty time takes Lomax's thoughts to the unthinkable 'not yet', the unknown that contains the possibility of what is 'still to be' (Deleuze [1969] 1990: 5). The other effect of this looped action is to evoke the uncanny experience of the epileptic fit or the strange compulsive repetitions of madness. We evoke both in the editing of some of our looped actions that are caught in a jerking, digital stasis, as Freud described:

> The uncanny effect of epilepsy and madness has the same effect. The layman sees in them the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being.

([1919] 2003: 234)

Our own human form in this context becomes at once familiar and unfamiliar, homely and unhomely. Rachel Jones suggests that, 'Learning to see as strange makes us un-at-home in the everyday, and thereby restores it as a potential place of marvel, where we might become other than what or who we are' (2013: 18). The 'eye' of the scanner allows for this shift in perspective as everything in its range is re-presented in a radically altered, atemporal and mutable form. Remaining open to possible encounters, with ourselves and others, we risk potential transformation and revelation, bringing to light that which was previously hidden.

Acknowledgements

References

Comay, Rebecca and Newman, Michael ([2001] 2012), 'Ghostly medium: James Coleman's Charon', in *Photography in a Post-Medium Age, Tate Modern, London, 29 June*, London: Tate London.
Deleuze, Gilles ([1969] 1990), *Logique du sens* (*The Logic of Sense*) (ed. C.V Boundas, trans. M. Lester and C. Stivale), London: The Athlone Press.

Freud, Sigmund ([1906–1908] 2001), 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming', in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IX Jensen's' Grava' and Other Works*, London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, pp. 141–54.

—— ([1919] 2003), *The Uncanny*, London: Penguin.

Hiller, Susan (2000), *After the Freud Museum*, London: Book Works.

Jones, Rachel (2013), 'On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again, and Letting Be', in E. Fischer and R. Fortnum (eds), *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, London: Black Dog Publishing, pp. 16–31.

Lewis, Chara, Mojsiewicz, Kristin and Pettican, Anneke (2014), 'Submerged and disrupted identities', *Conformity, Process and Deviation: Digital Arts as 'Outsider' Chart Conference, Festival of the Humanities,* Kingston University, London, 18 October.

Lomax, Yve (2006), 'Thinking Stillness', in D. Green and J. Lowry (eds), *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image,* and Brighton: Photo forum/Photo works.

Masschelein, Anneleen (2011), *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Morra, Joanne (2015), 'Reflections | Iterations', http://www.international3.com/2015/09/brass-art-commissioned-text/0. Accessed 1 July 2016.

Nietzsche, Friedrich ([1887] 1994), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Royle, Nicholas (2003), *The Uncanny*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thompson, Susannah (2014), 'Brass Art: The Imagining of Things', in S. Swindells and C. McAra (eds), *ROTOR: Transdisciplinary Dialogue and Debate*, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, pp. 42–44.

Vidler, Anthony ([1992] 1996), *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

—— (2002), *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wood, Jon (2006), *Freud's Sculpture*, Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust.

Suggested citation

Contributor details

Brass Art is the collaborative practice of Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz and Anneke Pettican, based in Manchester, Glasgow and Huddersfield. Working together since 1999, they have explored notions of time, doubling, embodiment and liminality working with both traditional media and digital technologies. Their current research focuses on the creative and performative potential of 3D body-scanning technology, 3D rapid prototyping, shadow-play and Kinect on-range scanning. Recent work *Freud's House: The Double* was commissioned by University of Salford's Commission to Collect scheme and installed for a solo exhibition at The International 3, Manchester and the Freud Museum's Festival of the Unconscious, London (2015). Brass Art organized the conference *Folds in Time: Artists' Responses to the Temporal and the Uncanny* at The Anna Freud Centre (2015). Photographic and video work made at the Brontë Parsonage and the ruins of Wycoller Hall formed an installation *The Imagining of Things*, with immersive soundscape by Alistair MacDonald, at Huddersfield Art Gallery (2013). Recent exhibitions include: *Tatton Park Biennial: Flights of Fancy*, Cheshire (2012); *Dark Matters: Shadow Technology Art*, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (2011); *Skyscraping*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (2008); and *The Jerwood Drawing Prize*, Jerwood Space, London and touring (2008) (www.brassart.org.uk).

Chara Lewis lectures in fine art at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK.
Contact: School of Art, Manchester School of Art, Cavendish Street, Manchester, M15 6BR, UK.
E-mail: c.lewis@mmu.ac.uk

Kristin Mojsiewicz lectures in fine art at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, UK.
Contact: School of Art, Edinburgh College of Art, 74 Lauriston Place, Edinburgh, EH3 9DF, UK.
E-mail: k.mojsiewicz@ed.ac.uk

Anneke Pettican lectures in art and communication at the University of Huddersfield, UK.
Contact: Department of Art and Communication, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK.
E-mail: a.pettican@hud.ac.uk